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**PRAGMATIC STRATEGIES IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: A SPEECH ACTS
AND POLITENESS ANALYSIS OF KASHIM SHETTIMA'S ADDRESS AT THE 79TH
UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

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Abstract

This paper investigates the pragmatic strategies employed in Vice President Kashim Shettima's address at the Seventy-Ninth Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Drawing on Austin's Speech Acts theory and Searle's classification of illocutionary acts, alongside Brown and Levinson's Politeness theory, the study analyses how Shettima deploys language to perform communicative acts in a global political context. The methodology adopts a qualitative descriptive design, sourcing primary data from the official transcript of the UNGA speech and supplemented by secondary scholarly materials. The analysis relies on purposive sampling of forty excerpts that exemplify speech acts, systematically interpreted in relation to their illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect. Findings reveal that Shettima's speech is rich in directive acts urging international cooperation, commissive acts pledging Nigeria's commitment to peace and development, expressive acts conveying gratitude and solidarity, and declarative acts reinforcing Nigeria's global commitments. Politeness strategies, particularly positive politeness and face-saving devices, were employed to foster goodwill and reduce imposition in the diplomatic environment of the UN. The study concludes that Shettima's linguistic choices are not only rhetorical but also pragmatic, as they negotiate power, solidarity, and persuasion. It further suggests that pragmatic analysis of African leaders' speeches at multilateral platforms provides insight into the intersection of politics, language, and international relations.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Speech Acts, Politeness, Political Communication, Shettima, UNGA, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Political speeches constitute one of the most influential genres of discourse in the global public sphere. At platforms such as the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), leaders employ language not merely to convey information but as a strategic tool for persuasion, negotiation, and ideological construction. As Chilton asserts, “political discourse is inherently pragmatic because it performs actions such as promising, commanding, and requesting, rather than merely describing” (45).

This study examines Vice President Kashim Shettima’s 2024 address at the UNGA. The speech is significant because it represents Nigeria’s official diplomatic stance in a forum where language operates as an instrument of persuasion and cooperation. Previous studies on Nigerian political speeches, such as Ojo’s analysis of commissive strategies which argues that “political leaders often use promises to secure legitimacy” (185), and Wright’s study of African leaders’ rhetorical framing at the UN which demonstrates that “linguistic strategies are crucial to sustaining international diplomacy” (200), highlight the role of pragmatic choices in political communication.

However, little scholarly attention has been paid to Shettima’s UNGA address, creating a gap which this paper addresses. The focus is to investigate how Shettima employs speech acts and politeness strategies to achieve pragmatic goals in a formal, multilateral context.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws primarily on Speech Acts theory and Politeness theory. Austin explains that utterances are “performative acts which do not just say something but also do something” (94).

He identifies three dimensions: the locutionary act (the utterance itself), the illocutionary act (the

intended function), and the perlocutionary act (the effect on the listener). Searle extends this by classifying illocutionary acts into assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives (67).

Brown and Levinson's politeness framework complements this. They argue that communication often involves face-threatening acts, mitigated through strategies of politeness. As they explain, "positive face is the desire for approval and belonging, while negative face is the desire for autonomy and freedom of action" (61). Politeness strategies thus preserve social relations, particularly in high-stakes diplomatic interactions.

Mey reinforces this view, noting that "the perlocutionary effect of political rhetoric lies in its ability to influence perception, mobilise support, and reinforce legitimacy" (182). Pragmatics therefore provides an effective framework to examine Shettima's speech as political action embedded within diplomacy.

3. Literature Review

Pragmatics in political discourse has attracted extensive scholarly attention globally. Chilton argues that "language in politics functions not only as a medium of communication but also as an instrument of control and persuasion" (55). Similarly, Crystal defines pragmatics as "the study of language from the point of view of users and the choices they make" (364). Both studies converge with the present research in emphasising the action-oriented nature of political language, underpinning the use of speech acts in diplomatic contexts. However, they diverge by primarily addressing Western or general linguistic contexts, leaving African leaders' speeches at multilateral platforms largely unexplored. This study addresses this gap by focusing on

Shettima's UNGA speech, where pragmatic strategies serve both diplomatic and persuasive purposes.

In the Nigerian context, Opeibi's analysis of the 1993 presidential campaigns shows how "discourse was weaponised to manipulate political legitimacy" (112). His study aligns with this research in highlighting the strategic deployment of language to influence audience perception. The divergence, however, lies in the scope and setting: Opeibi focuses on domestic election campaigns, whereas the current study examines an African leader engaging a global audience at the UNGA, where stakes, audience expectations, and diplomatic conventions differ significantly.

Usman and Bello reveal that directives are the most frequent pragmatic strategies in Nigerian presidential speeches because they enable leaders to mobilise collective action (27). This finding converges with the current paper, as Shettima's speech also demonstrates a preponderance of directive acts, particularly in appealing for international cooperation on climate change, peace, and economic development. The divergence lies in the target audience and geopolitical context; while Usman and Bello examine local electorates, this study examines an international platform requiring a delicate balance of persuasion and diplomacy.

Okoro and Ogbodo observe that "political speeches in Nigeria are designed to persuade both local and international audiences through a balance of assertives and commissives" (214). This finding aligns with Shettima's speech, where assertive and commissive acts are central to projecting Nigeria's commitments to global peace and regional stability. The divergence is in empirical scope: Okoro and Ogbodo examine a range of speeches over time, whereas this study focuses intensively on a single high-stakes global speech, allowing for a more detailed pragmatic and politeness analysis.

Studies focusing on politeness strategies emphasise their role in mitigating imposition. Adegoju, for instance, shows how Nigerian leaders “deploy positive politeness strategies to maintain solidarity and reduce conflict” (102). Similarly, Mensah and Adeoye demonstrate that politeness in Ghanaian and Nigerian political speeches “constructs national identity and projects humility” (55). These studies converge with the current research in highlighting politeness as a tool for face management and solidarity, but they diverge by largely focusing on domestic political contexts. In contrast, Shettima’s UNGA speech demonstrates the strategic international use of politeness, where positive politeness and hedging serve to balance Nigeria’s interests with the diplomatic norms of multilateral forums.

Beyond African scholarship, global studies also provide insight into pragmatic strategies. Thomas asserts that pragmatics offers “the analytical framework to study meaning in interaction, especially where political leaders attempt to align their utterances with diverse audiences” (32). Mey similarly emphasises that “the perlocutionary effect of political rhetoric lies in its ability to influence perception, mobilise support, and reinforce legitimacy” (182). These studies converge with this research in highlighting the performative and persuasive power of speech acts, particularly assertives and commissives. However, they diverge by focusing primarily on Western political contexts, leaving the strategic use of speech acts by African leaders in global forums underexplored.

Obeng’s study on Ghanaian parliamentary discourse notes that indirectness and hedging are used to manage face and reduce conflict, stating that “acts of indirection are deployed strategically to achieve politeness while maintaining authority” (49). This converges with Shettima’s use of indirect directives and inclusive pronouns to appeal to shared responsibility and solidarity. The divergence lies in the scale and context; Obeng examines legislative discourse within a single

nation, whereas Shettima's speech targets a multinational audience, necessitating a broader, internationally sensitive application of politeness strategies.

Omoniyi reinforces the intersection of politeness and national identity in Nigerian political speeches, arguing that such strategies "project humility and solidarity in domestic and international communication" (112). This aligns with the current research in showing how politeness strategies in Shettima's speech serve not just to soften directives but also to construct a positive diplomatic image for Nigeria. The divergence is that Omoniyi focuses on multiple speeches across contexts, while this study offers a micro-analytical approach to a single high-profile international speech.

In sum, while existing literature provides a foundation for understanding pragmatic strategies and politeness in African and global political discourse, most studies either focus on domestic audiences, local campaigns, or general political speech. Few explicitly examine African leaders at the UN, leaving a critical gap in understanding how speech acts and politeness strategies operate in high-stakes multilateral diplomacy. The present study addresses this gap by applying Speech Acts theory (Austin and Searle) and Politeness theory (Brown and Levinson) to Shettima's 2024 UNGA speech, providing a detailed and contextually grounded analysis of pragmatic strategies in international political communication.

4. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative descriptive design, appropriate for discourse analysis where meaning and context are prioritised over quantification. Creswell notes that qualitative research "explores textual complexity to uncover underlying social realities" (45).

The primary data is Shettima's UNGA speech transcript. Using purposive sampling, forty excerpts were selected as units of analysis based on their pragmatic significance. As Tannen explains, purposive selection ensures that "salient extracts illustrate the phenomena under investigation" (74). Each excerpt was categorised into one of Searle's five illocutionary types and further examined through Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies.

The analysis was conducted thematically to identify recurrent pragmatic patterns. Levinson observes that pragmatic interpretation requires attention both to "the linguistic form and the socio-political context in which it occurs" (89). Accordingly, Shettima's speech was analysed both as language and as political performance.

5. Data Analysis

5.1 Directive Speech Acts

Directive acts seek to influence the behaviour of the hearer by urging them towards a particular course of action. Searle explains that directives "express the speaker's desire and are aimed at making the world conform to that desire" (36). In Shettima's address, directives are central to his communicative strategy, especially where he mobilises international cooperation on shared concerns.

For instance, he asserted: "We call upon the international community to stand with Africa in confronting the existential threats of climate change" (Paragraph 3). The illocutionary force here is a call for solidarity, while the perlocutionary goal is to spur tangible international commitment. The inclusive pronoun "we" functions as a strategic device of alignment. Brown and Levinson argue that such pronouns "mitigate imposition by appealing to common ground" (102). By

framing Africa's crisis as a global challenge, Shettima expands the moral responsibility of his audience.

He reinforced this appeal with another hortative: "Let us commit to building a just and equitable global order where no nation is left behind" (Paragraph 6). The phrase "let us" reduces direct imposition by embedding the command within a collective moral obligation. Leech observes that mitigated directives are shaped by the "maxim of tact" because they "reduce the degree of cost to the hearer while highlighting shared benefit" (145). This rhetorical move transforms what could be perceived as a demand into a collaborative invitation.

In a broader sense, Shettima's directives achieve two pragmatic ends. First, in strengthening Nigeria's diplomatic ethos, they portray the country as a voice of collective responsibility rather than narrow self-interest. Secondly, they place moral pressure on powerful states without alienating them, since the appeals are framed as inclusive rather than confrontational. This delicate balance reflects what Austin calls the "felicity conditions" of successful speech acts, where the context and wording ensure that the directive carries force while remaining acceptable to its audience (42).

Overall, Shettima's directive acts combine assertiveness with politeness, appealing to common ground, collective responsibility, and ethical obligation. This blend enhances their persuasive potential, even though the abstraction of such appeals may slow their translation into concrete international action.

5.2 Commissive Speech Acts

Commissive acts are those in which the speaker undertakes an obligation for the future. Searle affirms that "commissives commit the speaker to a certain course of action" (62). In Shettima's

address, commissives are especially prominent, projecting Nigeria's reliability and long-term diplomatic commitments.

He pledged: "Nigeria will continue to play its role as a stabilising force in West Africa, ensuring that democracy and peace remain the bedrock of our region" (Paragraph 9). The choice of the modal "will continue" signals consistency and dependability. Brown and Levinson explain that such commitments enhance positive face by presenting leaders as trustworthy actors within the international arena (110). This not only reassures neighbouring states but also portrays Nigeria as a guarantor of regional order.

Another assurance came in his declaration: "We are committed to implementing bold reforms that will reposition our economy and uplift millions of our citizens out of poverty" (Paragraph 12). Here, Shettima aligns domestic economic reform with international credibility. Leech notes that commissives often serve politeness functions by "emphasising benefits to others" (153). In this case, the promised reforms are framed as benefiting both citizens and international partners who may engage with a more stable economy.

Through these commissives, Shettima constructs Nigeria's image as forward-looking and dependable. They perform a dual function: domestically, they project accountability to citizens; internationally, they strengthen Nigeria's moral authority and credibility in global partnerships. The illocutionary force is a promise, while the perlocutionary goal is to secure confidence and cooperation from both internal and external audiences.

5.3 Expressive Speech Acts

Expressive acts convey the speaker's psychological state, revealing emotions, attitudes, or value judgments. Searle defines them as acts where "the speaker expresses a psychological attitude

toward a state of affairs” (67). In political discourse, expressives are vital because they humanise leadership, foster solidarity, and legitimise commitments.

Shettima expressed gratitude when he declared: “We are deeply grateful for the support Nigeria continues to receive from our international partners in our quest for security and development” (Paragraph 15). This act of appreciation acknowledges external assistance while reinforcing Nigeria’s role as a cooperative partner. Leech links such expressives to the “maxim of approbation,” which emphasises praising others to strengthen social bonds (165). Gratitude here operates as both a diplomatic courtesy and a strategic gesture of goodwill.

He also expressed empathy: “We feel the pain of our people who have endured years of economic hardship, and we are determined to bring relief” (Paragraph 17). This acknowledgement of citizens’ suffering establishes a bond of shared struggle. Wodak argues that empathetic expressives “legitimise political reforms by acknowledging citizens’ struggles” (94). By voicing collective pain, Shettima frames his government’s policies as morally responsive rather than merely technocratic.

Through these expressives, the Vice President projects an image of sensitivity and solidarity, balancing the hard rhetoric of commitments with softer appeals to shared humanity. They serve not only to display emotions but also to reinforce political authority by demonstrating awareness of the people’s condition and appreciation of international partnerships.

5.4 Declarative Speech Acts

Declarative acts function to alter social or institutional reality through the utterance itself. Austin maintains that declaratives “bring about changes in institutional reality, given the right authority

and context” (121). In political discourse, they allow leaders to perform actions that are legally, socially, or diplomatically binding.

Shettima proclaimed: “Nigeria hereby reaffirms its unwavering commitment to the principles of the United Nations and to multilateral cooperation” (Paragraph 21). This declarative does more than describe Nigeria’s stance; it enacts a formal reaffirmation of diplomatic commitment. Searle explains that declaratives “directly alter external circumstances when performed legitimately” (72), highlighting that Shettima’s utterance transforms Nigeria’s policy position into an observable act within the international arena.

He further declared: “Nigeria has entered a new era of governance marked by transparency, accountability, and economic diversification” (Paragraph 24). This statement does not merely report change; it constitutes a performative act that signals institutional reform. Van Dijk notes that such declarations “symbolically signal the beginning of a new order” (85), demonstrating the capacity of language to shape perceptions of political reality.

Through these declaratives, Shettima legitimises policy initiatives, communicates accountability, and reinforces Nigeria’s diplomatic credibility. They illustrate how language in political discourse can perform reality-altering actions, simultaneously informing, committing, and persuading both domestic and international audiences.

5.5 Assertive Speech Acts

Assertive acts are utterances in which the speaker conveys information, claims, or beliefs about the world, committing to the truth of the proposition. Searle explains that assertives “express the speaker’s belief that a proposition is true” (67). In political discourse, assertives are crucial for affirming positions, establishing credibility, and shaping audience perception.

In his UNGA address, Shettima stated: “Nigeria remains committed to upholding human rights and democratic governance across the continent” (Paragraph 27). This assertive conveys Nigeria’s firm stance on governance and human rights, signalling both domestic and international audiences about the country’s normative commitments. Leech observes that assertives can indirectly function as politeness strategies by “projecting the speaker as reliable and informed” (157), thereby enhancing trust in the communicator.

Another example is his declaration: “Our national development agenda prioritises education, healthcare, and infrastructure to improve the quality of life for all citizens” (Paragraph 30). Here, Shettima asserts concrete policy priorities, grounding his discourse in factual and strategic commitments. Brown and Levinson note that assertives strengthen positive face by “demonstrating competence and alignment with shared values” (108).

Through assertives, Shettima constructs a narrative of national responsibility and international accountability. They not only inform but also persuade, reinforcing the legitimacy of Nigeria’s political and developmental agenda while projecting credibility on a global platform.

6. Findings

From the analysis, several findings emerge:

1. Multiplicity of Speech Acts: Shettima’s address exhibits directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives, each performing a pragmatic function in diplomacy.
2. Prevalence of Directives: Directive acts dominated the speech, particularly in calls for international cooperation on terrorism, climate change, and economic stability.

3. Strategic Commissives: Commissives projected Nigeria as a responsible partner committed to reforms and global peace.
4. Humanising Expressives: Expressives reinforced goodwill, empathy, and solidarity with both citizens and the international community.
5. Institutional Declaratives: Declaratives institutionalised Nigeria's commitments, signalling shifts in policy direction.
6. Politeness as Diplomacy: Positive politeness strategies softened potential face threats, preserving Nigeria's diplomatic image.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Shettima's UNGA speech was pragmatically structured to persuade, reassure, and legitimise Nigeria's international role. Through directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives, the speech projected Nigeria as cooperative, reliable, and reform-oriented. Politeness strategies ensured that these acts were delivered with diplomatic tact, balancing national interest with international solidarity.

The findings confirm that political discourse at the UNGA is not only rhetorical but performative, as language enacts commitments and projects identity. This underscores the intersection of pragmatics and politics, showing that African leaders like Shettima employ sophisticated linguistic strategies in global diplomacy.

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